

THE

US ISSN 0010-1443

COLONIAL NEWSLETTER

P.O.Box 4411

Huntsville, Alabama 35802

J. C. Spilman, Editor

Volume 18, No. 1

April, 1979

Serial No. 54



The "New York" IMMUNIS: A Mystery Unraveled

● Walter Breen ●



Photograph 2x enlargement



A BLEND OF CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE
AND SHREWD DETECTIVE WORK.



Sequential page 667

The "New York" IMMUNIS: A Mystery Unraveled

● by Walter Breen; Berkeley, California

Most collectors have seen the enigmatic copper familiarly known as the "1787 New York IMMUNIS COLUMBIA," with its rude figure seated on a globe, holding the scales of Justice and the cap of Liberty on a flagpole with unidentified flag, and on the other side its equally rude eagle with E PLURIBUS UNUM.



Figure 1

The "New York" IMMUNIS of 1787

Most who have felt affluent enough to fit it into their collections of colonial coppers have bid on it at one time or another -- there are probably at least 100 around, which gives most of us a chance at it sooner or later; others have ignored it, but all since long before Crosby's day have not bothered to ask why it has that "New York" name, who made it, where it was made, or why. I present some reasonable answers to all of these questions, answers based on a deeper study of the coin itself, in the absence of specific documentation.

A few things can be noticed about this copper even on the most casual inspection. About the first is that the blanks are usually too narrow, only rarely wide enough to show the full date, but thicker than usual for anonymous token coppers -- which points to these blanks having been intended for some other purpose. The weight averages about 135 grains or 52 to the pound, which is much heavier than the Birmingham standard of 117 grains (60 to the pound), still heavier than Vermont coppers at 111, or Machin's Mills coppers, though too light for legal New Jerseys, Connecticut, Massachusetts or Fugios. It is almost exactly the legal weight of Irish halfpence -- a point which will assume some importance later on. The blanks are also smoother than usual and not nearly as defective as one usually finds on state coppers.

Its designs are also fairly unusual and more elaborate than generally found. The single working obverse die is obviously copied from Wyon's rare 1785-86 British patterns for the Confederation, though with the corrected inscription IMMUNIS COLUMBIA.

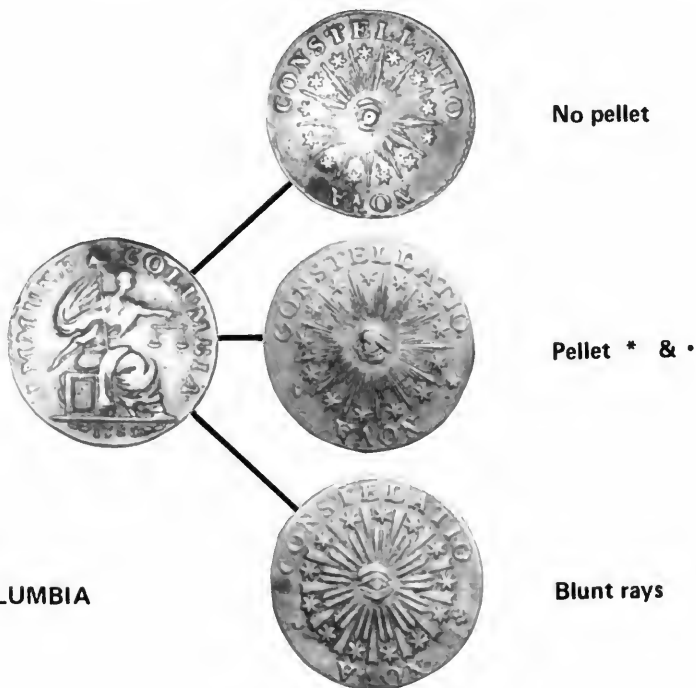


Figure 2

The IMMUNE COLUMBIA



Figure 3

Wyon's 1786 IMMUNIS



Figure 4

Atlee's Imitation 1786 IMMUNIS

As for the eagle, it is not much like any in the colonial series, though it might conceivably be a simplified version of that found on the EXCELSIOR pattern coppers. Note that its inscriptions nowhere refer to New York or any other state, nor is there a shield or other device relevant to any one state, which is a valuable clue to its intent.



Figure 5

EXCELSIOR Pattern Coppers

It has long been attributed to James F. Atlee, on the perfectly valid grounds that its letter punches are identical to those which Atlee used for many of the 1787-88 Standard Bust Right coppers for Vermont, for which he cut the dies pursuant to the ruinous agreement the Vermont coiners made with the Machin's Mills people in June 1787. But seemingly that is all.

What more can be discovered about this obscure copper at this late date? Why is it important enough to re-examine?

Oddly, when I began writing minimonographs on all the major Colonial series, at first for some of FCI's clients in the Colonial American Coin Club, and later for projected book publication, I found myself re-examining everything that had been published and/or privately deduced or conjectured about the more obscure Colonial issues, this one among them, and some very strange but inevitable interpretations emerged. I would like to share with you some of these new deductions, and maybe you can share with me my delight in finally discovering why this particular coin was made, where, and for whom -- a piece of detective work which was as much fun for me as treasure hunts used to be when I was a kid.

The first thing we have to re-examine, then, is those Atlee letter punches. Atlee is known to have used a different set in 1788-89 for imitation halfpence at Machin's Mills and for some of the 1788-dated Connecticuts known to have been made at the Newburgh hardware manufactory; and that set replaced the one he had been using in 1786-87 because by late 1787 some of the letters had chipped or broken at the serifs. I take the earliest set to be that used for the letters on Atlee's NON VI VIRTUTE VICI of 1786, some of which reappear on the "NY" IMMUNIS of 1787. We can be reasonably sure that the NON VI VIRTUTE VICI coins were

made in New York about March 1786, because John Mycoll's Essex Journal and Merimack Packet; or, The Massachusetts and New Hampshire Advertiser (Newburyport), March 29, 1786, refers to these coins as evidently a new issue for New York, singling them out for their "good quality" of copper, but understandably misbelieving them to be an official issue because of their inscription NEO-EBORACENSIS ("at New York").



Figure 6

Large Head NON VI VIRTUTE VICI



Figure 7

Small Head NON VI VIRTUTE VICI

At this point we must ask where Atlee was between March 1786 and June 1787, after which time he moved to Machin's Mills, near Newburgh, New York. We know that as of April 18, 1787 he described himself as "of the City of New-York" on the articles of agreement between Thomas Machin, Samuel Atlee, himself, and the other three founding members of Machin's Mills. He also claimed New York city residence in June 1787 at his signing the agreement with the Vermont coiners. If we are to find out where the IMMUNIS COLUMBIA was made, we have to figure out first if it was made while Atlee was at Machin's Mills or earlier, and if earlier, what are the possible locales.

Though Atlee's name has not been found in any city directories for 1786 or 1787, to date, nevertheless an answer is readily provided by searching among other Colonial coppers of 1786 and 1787 for letters from those same punches common to the NON VI VIRTUTE VICI and the "N.Y." IMMUNIS, and asking if their place of origin can be determined.

There are two major groups of coppers dated 1786 that show any of Atlee's punches. The smaller of these is the bust right Connecticuts of 1786, some of which are known on other grounds to have been made early in that year, and to have been identified as counterfeits, inducing Abel Buell to adopt a mailed bust left design for the genuine 1786 Connecticuts from the New Haven "Company for Coining Coppers." The other and much larger group consists of thirteen obverse dies for the 1786 New Jersey coppers with coulter to plow, with their twelve reverses, which group is die-linked at the beginning to the group without coulter, and both die-linked and punch-linked

at the end to twenty more obverses dated 1787 -- forming virtually the entire output of the Rahway Mint before lawsuits broke up its founding partnership of Goadsby & Cox, forced Cox into debtor's prison June 1 and resulted in Goadsby carting off the presses, most of the dies, copper ingots, blanks, rollers, and other ironmongery, leaving the partnership's bondsman Matthias Ogden minding the empty store. One of those lawsuits was instituted by Samuel Atlee (a relative of James ?). All of them sought to recover moneys due and payable for goods delivered or for services rendered, with costs and damages.

The picture now becomes clear enough. James F. Atlee must have been working full time for the Rahway Mint ("Rahway Mills" as it was then known) between about the end of 1786 and June 1787, making dies for a completely legal state coinage. He was evidently not paid, or at best not paid enough, to induce him to stay on; as early as April 1787 he was already evidently planning to leave, or he would not have become a partner of Machin's Mills, over a day's ride from Rahway.

Now we need to pay some attention to the planchets on which the "New York" IMMUNIS comes, which will provide clues both to the time of issue and the location. Over 90% of the surviving specimens are on thick smooth blanks entirely unlike those used for the Machin's Mills imitation halfpennies or the Vermonts or Connecticut cuts known to have been made by the Machin people at Newburgh. They are, however, identical in fabric to the blanks used for some of the latest Rahway Mint issues -- the 1787's with curved beams and those same Atlee punches, Maris 41 through 47 and 68, which raises the question of their being made in the same place, namely the legal mint at Rahway, New Jersey. (We shall get back to this question, in connexion with the abovementioned Matthias Ogden, a bit later.) A few others are known overstruck on CONSTELLATIO NOVA coppers, which points to a date of issue for at least these few around June 1787, as that is when the value of these coppers fell to a point where both the Vermont coiners and the Machin's Mills people found it worthwhile to buy them up in quantity for reuse for their own issues. There are also a few overstruck on New Jersey coppers; the incredible piece in the 1976 ANA Convention sale was overstruck on a 1786 Maris 26-S, which is known to have been the very last Rahway Mint variety bearing that date, and to have been struck in the late spring of 1787. All these lines of evidence point to a brief issue in May and June 1787, though not impossibly some might have been made earlier, say in March or April; there is no proof that all were struck on a single occasion.

The designs and inscriptions of this coin point to its being intended not for any one state but for the Confederation itself, or its successor the United States in Congress Assembled, and a reasonable guess is that these coins were samples intended to illustrate a proposed contract coinage. This sort of thing was nothing new for Atlee, of course; we know that he made such samples for Thomas Machin's March 3, 1787 petition for a contract coinage for New York state (the GEORGE CLINTON and LIBER NATUS LIBERTATEM DEFENDO issues), at a weight of 46 to the pound, i.e. the standard of Tower Mint halfpence.



Figure 8

GEORGE CLINTON & LIBER NATUS LIBERTATEM DEFENDO Issues

Atlee could also have known, from Wyon's pupil Walter Mould who was originally associated with Goadsby & Cox of the Rahway Mint before November 1786, of Wyon's patterns for the Confederation -- the 1785 IMMUNE COLUMBIA and 1786 IMMUNIS COLUMBIA -- especially as Walter Mould had brought over with him the 1785 die and several of the sample coins. Wyon had been very much favored by government officials; after all, Gouverneur Morris himself had made a contract with Wyon's mint in Birmingham, England, to manufacture many tons of CONSTELLATIO NOVA coppers for American circulation, and several of those same dies were used on Wyon's own samples for a proposed silver contract coinage for the Confederation in 1785: see Figures 2 & 3.

What more natural, then, than to copy the Wyon designs on any new samples for a federal contract coinage? The eagle device, with the federal motto E PLURIBUS UNUM, and its arrows and olive branch, must refer to that on the Great Seal of the United States (1782).

Weight standards on these various coins deserve attention here. Three were in use: Tower Mint halfpenny standard, Irish halfpenny standard, and Birmingham standard.

Tower Mint halfpence were struck at 46 to the pound avoirdupois = 152.17+ grains each, average. This figure was so high as to destroy private coiners' profit margins and discourage local imitations. This is doubtless why Wyon used it for making INIMICA TYRANNIS/CONFEDERATIO pattern Decads of 1785. (The figure of 48 to the pound quoted in Crosby is the New York legislative committee's error.)

Private coiners in Birmingham normally struck their coppers at 60 to the pound = 116 2/3 grains average apiece. Most of the unofficial coppers which passed at from 14 to 18 per shilling during the 1780's throughout the colonies were made at this standard. Walter Mould's sample coins for the Confederation (believed to include the Washington/1786 Eagle) were struck at this standard and therefore offered no advantage over bungtown coppers; this may have been a factor in official

rejection of his petition for a coinage franchise. (The authorities probably neither knew nor cared that the Virginia halfpence were struck at this weight standard.)

However, Wyon seems to have used the Irish halfpenny standard for some of his later pattern coins. This was 52 to the pound = 134.6 grains each, average. Both the Washington/CONFEDERATIO and the 1786 IMMUNIS/Shield patterns come on blanks of this standard. Wyon's pupil Walter Mould brought over many samples and some dies, and before the quarrel with Goadsby and Cox which split up thier partnership and induced Mould to move his mint equipment to Morristown, most likely Atlee would have learned from Mould not only about the 1786 IMMUNIS coins but about their weight standard. This may account, then, for the 1787 IMMUNIS closely following the latter, in weight as well as design.



Figure 9

Walter Mould's Pattern Coppers for the Confederation

(Dies by Atlee)

Now if Atlee made the IMMUNIS COLUMBIA coins in late spring or early summer 1787, then the Rahway Mint location is a much more probable one than Machin's Mills; the Mills were not yet in full operation at that time. Moreover, the fabric of the planchets -- even to microscopic details of texture -- matches those on the Rahway Mint Jersey coppers, as we saw earlier, but not those of Machin's Mills issues.

But to clinch the attribution, and to give it a purpose, we have to figure out under whose auspices and why these coins were made. Was anyone at the Rahway Mint then in fact interested in a contract coinage for the federal government? It so happens that the answer is yes, the individual is known by name, and he is the single most important figure in the history of the New Jersey mints. This is General Matthias Ogden, Revolutionary War hero, member of the New Jersey Legislative Council from Essex County, and member of the original legislative committee drawing up the contract with Goadsby & Cox to fix terms acceptable both to them and to the state legislature for establishing a mint to make state copper coins. Ogden had held the contract for transporting mail between New York and Philadelphia, but gave it to his fellow Assemblyman Daniel Marsh, who owned the land later rented to Goadsby & Cox for "Rahway Mills." Ogden stood as surety bond for that firm for payment of rent to Marsh (seven years at 130 Pounds per year, then a very high figure); but when they defaulted, he was obliged to pay the rent himself. After he recovered the mint equipment carted away by Goadsby, he struck over 539,000 more coppers himself through June 1788.

As of March 23, 1787, Ogden submitted a petition to Congress, offering to strike 300 tons of coppers at federal standard (whichever weight Congress would specify), paying Congress 15% of the coins for the privilege, and promising that "In 14 days we can begin the work. Everything necessary is already prepar'd and before any Company on this Continent (if there are any adequate to it) can Erect works and a sufficient Establishment to carry the Contract into Effect, we can nearly finish it and we add with Confidence with better Execution."

On April 9 the reorganized Board of Treasury under Col. William Duer resubmitted to Congress both Ogden's proposal and a similar one by James Jarvis, then part owner of the New Haven "Company for Coining Coppers," for further pro forma consideration; though Duer had already made sure that Jarvis would receive the contract in exchange for a \$10,000 bribe from Jarvis. Duer had even gone so far as to turn over some 12,809 pounds of federally owned copper to Jarvis for the purpose, as of Jan. 16, or some months before the Ogden proposal had come up! And so, as of April 20, Congress advised acceptance of Jarvis's proposal providing that he match Ogden's terms; on the next day Duer, acting for the Board of Treasury, contracted with Jarvis for what were to be the FUGIO coppers, at the very terms Ogden had proposed. On May 8, Congress authorized Duer to dispose of the remaining 35 tons of federally owned copper as he might see fit. Duer turned it over to Jarvis at a nominal 11 1/4 pence sterling per pound, payable in the new coppers, but the only payment Congress ever received was a token shipment, in mid-May 1788, of slightly under 4 1/2 tons of FUGIO coppers; the rest was used by Jarvis for making Connecticut coins, most of the 1787-88 draped bust coins being struck from the federally owned copper. Authority to coin had followed as of May 12, the designs being approved as of July 6, 1787. Jarvis went to Europe; Congress eventually voided his contract for default and sued him for \$10,842.24, obtaining a judgment in that amount, but unable to collect a cent. Against Duer nothing was done at all; he went to debtor's prison in 1792 and died in 1799. Congress turned over the 398,577 FUGIOs to Royal Flint, a "Broadway merchant" who was caught with them when the New York "copper panic" occurred, and had managed to repay only about a third of their value to Congress when the sheriff came to take him to debtor's prison.



Figure 10

But in the meantime, Matthias Ogden, who could have fulfilled the contract, vainly awaited word from Congress about his proposal. At some time between March 23 and possibly July 1787, Ogden expected to confer with the Board of Treasury about his petition, at which time he would have had to show sample coins. What I am suggesting here is that these samples were the 1787 IMMUNIS COLUMBIA coppers, and that he was still vainly hoping for a favorable reply from Congress on his proposal even after the Rahway Mint began having legal difficulties. Afterwards, he probably made many others, to circulate side by side with other anonymous tokens in the New York City area. The "New York" sobriquet seems to have followed Crosby's associating the piece with the NON VI VIRTUTE VICI, the GEORGE CLINTON, and the LIBER NATUS pieces; but it may also have to do with recognition that Atlee, who made the dies, lived in New York. These coins, then, are the main survivors of what might have become our first federal coinage, frustrated by a \$10,000 bribe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The basic concept presented in The "New York" IMMUNIS: A Mystery Unraveled was first discussed publicly in a talk given by Walter Breen during the Early American Coppers Club Disneyland Convention in California on November 19, 1976. It has subsequently been revised, expanded and illustrated for publication in this issue of The Colonial Newsletter.

Special acknowledgement is due to the organizations, firms and individuals who have assisted by providing the illustrations. These sources are as follow:

- Frontispiece American Numismatic Society (Negative Nos. 4394 - 1 & 2)
- Figure 1 Bowers and Ruddy Galleries, Inc. (Lot 1759, The D.C. Montgomery Collection)
- Figure 2 Bowers and Ruddy Galleries, Inc. (Lot 10, The Newport Collection)
Kenneth Bressett (Constellatio Nava plate)
- Figure 3 The Nagy Plate of New Jersey Cappers
- Figure 4 Scatt Publishing Company (Scatt No. 233)
- Figure 5 Bowers and Ruddy Galleries, Inc. (Lot 232, The Kensington Collection)
American Numismatic Society (Negatives 462 & 464)
- Figure 6 Scatt Publishing Company (Scatt No. 231)
- Figure 7 Bowers and Ruddy Galleries, Inc. (Lot 1084, The Kensington Collection)
- Figure 8 Walter Breen (The George Clinton)
Bowers and Ruddy Galleries, Inc. (Lot 1100 reverse, The Getty Collection)
Scatt Publishing Company (Scatt No. 240 reverse)
- Figure 9 The Nagy Plate of New Jersey Cappers
- Figure 10 American Numismatic Society (D. G. Douglas Fugio manuscript plates)

JCS

